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SUBJECT: OVER 800 CHINESE SEE DEMOCRACY IN ACTION AT ELECTION EVENT

¶1. Summary: Embassy Beijing's U.S. Election Watch Event provided a variety of educational activities for over 800 Chinese students, academics, government employees, media representatives and business leaders. Guests stayed for hours, and emotions ran high as our Chinese guests contemplated the latest chapter of the U.S. democratic experience. End summary.

¶2. The Embassy's Public Affairs Section organized this year's U.S. Election Watch Event with the goal of not only providing American citizen and Chinese guests a venue to watch the election returns, but also educating Chinese guests on election procedures and giving them an opportunity to participate in American-style democracy. Several new initiatives this year received an overwhelmingly positive response from guests and the media.

#### Student Groups Led by Docents

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¶3. The first new initiative was aimed at students. Groups of 25 to 30 students arrived at the event with their professors and were greeted by EmbOffs, all volunteers in the Embassy speaker program. These "docents" engaged students in conversations about the Electoral College, answered questions about voting, and then led students to the mock voting area (paras 5-9). Students said this allowed them to get the most from the event and better understand U.S. democracy.

¶4. Embassy docents received a number of great questions from the students. A Beijing-based professor who is an alumnus of a USG-funded exchange program saw the students gathered around EmbOff and asked the officer what she was discussing. EmbOff said she was explaining America's Electoral College and citizen participation in elections. The professor said, "I am so glad these young Chinese are learning about American democracy. They are the ones who can bring democracy to China in their lifetimes, and they need to know how to make it happen."

#### Total Voter Experience

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¶5. Instead of the usual simple mock ballot, this year PAS aimed for a more realistic and educational voting process. The Chinese guests watched television ads by the Presidential candidates and interest groups, including ads from California. Then they received a ballot and a voter guide, which included explanations of local races and initiatives in California. The purpose was to enable the guests to experience the complexities of the election as an American voter might, as well as to highlight American diversity by using original California materials printed in three languages (English, Chinese and Spanish). Many guests were surprised to see that American ballots include more than just the Presidential candidates. The message: voting is not easy; you must be informed.

¶6. Guests' ballots were then tallied. Although the primary goal of the non-scientific poll was not to find out whom the Chinese supported for U.S. President, there was great interest in the results -- about 75% of the guests voted for Barack Obama. The results were reported in the Chinese media and cited on CNN.

¶7. The mock ballot initiatives included a mass transit initiative (supported by Chinese guests), a proposal to ban gay marriage (not supported), and an initiative aimed at improving the situation of farm animals (not supported).

¶8. One group of Peking University graduate students took the mock

vote very seriously. Every time EmbOff asked if they were ready to cast their vote, they responded that they still needed more information about the candidates. They made sure they had viewed all the commercials, read the candidates' platforms, etc., before making a decision. They even searched online to see which candidate received the largest Chinese-American vote before finally casting their ballots.

¶9. While handing out "I Voted" stickers, another EmbOff was struck by how eager Chinese guests were to capture the moment by taking pictures with their cameras or cell phones. Many guests asked to keep a sample ballot.

#### Other Outreach Activities

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¶10. EducationUSA handed out over 10 boxes of books about studying in the USA. The Information Resource Center (IRC) provided materials, developed by the IRC or IIP, in Chinese and English. The IRC also created an Internet Cafe with pre-set bookmarks to help guests access more in-depth information. The Internet Cafe was packed for the duration of the event. American Citizen Services staffed a voting information table for American citizens. Most guests chose to take photos with the life-sized cut-out figures of candidates Obama and McCain, many asking to take the cardboard candidates home after the party.

#### Extensive Media Coverage

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¶11. The event received extensive media coverage. CCTV-4 aired the program about the Election Watch Event on the same day on the 9 p.m. "China News Program," which is watched by millions of people across the country. Other coverage included: International Herald Leader, Legal Evening Daily, The Beijing News, Elite Reference, Beijing Youth Daily, Caijing Magazine, Beijing News, Sichuan News online, China Daily, AFP, Reuters, AFX, New Yorker online, MSNBC and CNN.

#### Emotional Chinese Response

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¶12. Unlike in years past, guests came and stayed for hours, bursting into applause as the results from different states came in. The young people in attendance were very well informed, and their enthusiasm for the election was reflected in their preparation for the event. They had insightful questions and articulated well-thought-out proposals, including for reforming the Electoral College system.

¶13. Our Chinese contacts were highly emotional in discussing the election. A Tsinghua University professor said that the results meant that the United States is entering a "new era." He commented that America is a highly unified country and that every four years, Americans split into two camps and argue about the issues, but then after the election they unify once again. He opined that the United States is the "only country in the world" that does it like this and that this shows the maturity of the U.S. democratic system.

¶14. At this election event, many Chinese guests were not focusing on the question "What does this mean for China in the short term?" but rather showed genuine interest and excitement about the U.S. election on its own terms. Other guests, in pull-asides after the main event, wondered aloud how the better elements of the process could be reflected in their own political system.

¶15. A university instructor told one officer that the other Chinese professors were amazed by how emotional Americans can get about their elections and really do not understand it. "When we pick a new President," he said, "no one cares."

¶16. One Embassy contact, a very patriotic Chinese who lived in Europe for several years and is often critical or even condescending toward the United States, sent the following message as the election results were announced: "You know, I was born in mainland China. From my childhood, I was subject to education that indoctrinated us with narrow-minded nationalism and traditional values. But I kept seeking after a lifestyle of freedom and a politics of democracy. I had thought that only European socialism could create this kind of

democracy and freedom that transcended race, ethnicity, and cultural divides. But, behold, it's in America. Suddenly, I see my own narrow-mindedness and ignorance. Because of my prejudice (I thought the U.S. had only 200 years of history), I never tried to truly understand your country. But what has transpired today could only have happened in America. This is the true culture shock brought to me by the United States. Yours is a country that has held fast to its dreams. With such tolerance, nothing is impossible. Shedding tears for your country and for your beliefs proves that you have never lost your soul."

¶17. Another response: "...I feel so moved by this...the era of change has finally come to America...and, I think, perhaps not just to America..."

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